

## Cross Purposes

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Category: Les Miserables  
Genre: Drama  
Language: English  
Characters: Bahorel  
Status: Completed  
Published: 2000-05-22 09:00:00  
Updated: 2000-05-22 09:00:00  
Packaged: 2016-04-27 18:19:27  
Rating: T  
Chapters: 1  
Words: 1,191  
Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)  
Summary: Jean Prouvaire at the barricade.

### Cross Purposes

\_Idiot,\_ Jean Prouvaire thinks furiously, even as he's dragged to his feet. \_You unutterable idiot, Jehan!\_

"What's this now?" demands a voice, and the man who's holding him straightens.

"Caught one, sir."

"Well, what for?"

Prouvaire tries to brush his hair out of his eyes, finds both his hands pinned, and ends up tossing his head impatiently. The voice belongs to a broad-shouldered National Guard about forty-five. His hair is beginning to grey, and his face is an honest one. He looks at Prouvaire's captor with benign contempt. "That's a barricade, son. What earthly good does he do us?"

"I thought," the other says stiffly, "he might be of more use alive than dead, sir, seeing as he fell outside the barricade anyway--"

\_But I didn't,\_ protests Prouvaire silently. \_Did I?\_ He twists in the grip that holds him to look back at the barricade. From this side it looks steep and formidable. From this side it shuts him out. There is a poem in that, or at least an epigram, and his mind tries foolishly to find it even as the rest of him is wrenched back around to face the elder soldier.

Who is saying matter-of-factly, "He might be, if he's willing to surrender. Otherwise, he'd be less trouble dead."

Prouvaire stares at him a moment, trying to reconcile the statement and the face. "That," he hears himself saying, "would seem to be a bit redundant."

The young man holding him laughs shortly: an odd sort of hoot which sounds vaguely familiar. The other man looks coldly amused. "It might," he says. "Put it this way: if you give yourself up willingly, if you swear you'll have no more part in this riot, I might see my way clear to sending you home, under escort. I've a boy of my own about your age."

"I'd sooner--" He cuts the word off, in sudden horror, but it is heard nonetheless. The man shakes his head grimly.

"You will, boy. I won't enjoy it, but I'll do it."

Prouvaire glances away. A shameful hysteria is tickling at the back of his throat, pure survival instinct. He swallows it with difficulty. \_Enjolras,\_ he thinks. \_Forgive me. I'm not a fighter, I'm not what you needed -- Combeferre --\_ He can feel the tears starting, and has to blink fiercely. \_Idiot, idiot, idiot!\_

The soldier's voice is mild, almost kind. "You look like a decent boy. Your mother know you're mixed up with this traitorous crowd?"

It's bait, of a sort. Prouvaire recognizes it, and fails to care. He looks back at the man squarely, despite his stinging eyes. "My mother raised no traitors to France, monsieur."

A single, impassive blink. "Then give it up."

"Never."

"You're a fool, Jean!" His captor jerks him around to face him, so violently that the breath leaves him, and he stares blankly into the exasperated eyes of his cousin Philippe. "This is the only chance you're going to get!"

"I don't want it." It comes out faint, half-hearted, sounding childish.

"You're mad."

"You know each other?" the older man breaks in dryly.

"He's my cousin," Philippe says reluctantly, after a pause, "sir. --My stupid, stubborn, daydreaming idiot little cousin, who doesn't know what kind of trouble he's in!"

"I do know," retorts Jean Prouvaire, a little more firmly this time.

"You just don't care."

"I just won't let it change my mind."

"You're a fool." Philippe lets him go with a shove, apparently forgetting that his cousin is his prisoner. "You've lost what sense you ever had."

"Enough," cuts in the older fellow sharply. "This is all very well, but the fact remains--"

"Let me talk to him. Five minutes. Let me just try to talk sense into him."

A moment of silence. Prouvaire briefly considers turning down the opportunity to be talked sense to, but it seems hardly worth protesting. The soldier studies him a moment, glances toward the barricade, then nods brusquely. "Five minutes."

"Sir," Philippe says shortly, and collaring Prouvaire again, drags him over to a comparatively quiet doorway and pins him there.

Prouvaire winces slightly, and looks up at him. Galling, those three or four inches Philippe has on him, or they always were until now. Now there are other things to worry about. He starts to say something patriotic and defiant, but what comes out is: "I didn't fall outside the barricade, did I."

"Don't be stupid. Of course not. I wasn't going to leave you in there."

He stares. "You really hate me, don't you?"

"I'm trying to save you, damn you!" His cousin's strong fingers dig painfully into his shoulders. "They don't have a chance in there!"

"I don't have one out here, either! Did you think I was there by accident? Did you think if I was on your side of the wall I'd be on your side of the fight?" To his own vague surprise, Prouvaire finds that he's angry. "I'm not ten years old anymore, I'm not going to do what you want me to do and say what you want me to say--"

"You don't damn well have a choice!"

--just because you think it's the best thing!" He takes a breath, willing himself to stop trembling. "I may be a fool, cousin, and I may well be a coward, but I'm not a traitor."

"Everyone on that barricade's a traitor, Jean."

"Not to the republic." In spite of himself, his voice quavers. He does his best to control it. "I don't intend to betray them. Not for you, not for my mother, and certainly not for myself."

"There isn't any damn republic!"

"There will be."

"You're a fool! You're crazy! What are these people to you?"

Jean Prouvaire closes his eyes for a moment, thinking of Combeferre, of Enjolras, of Feuilly. "My brothers."

Philippe stares at him in contempt, or incredulity, or awe, or merely incomprehension. After a moment he loosens his grip on Prouvaire's

shoulders, and straightens. "They'll do it, you know. They'll shoot you."

"I know that." He is fighting back tears again. \_Idiot. It doesn't do any good to cry, you stupid, sentimental--\_ "I knew that when I came here."

"You came to die?"

"I came to fight. I took the chance. I'm not going to back down now."

"Chabert--" It's the grey-haired soldier, halfway across the street. Philippe glances over at him. "Time's up."

"Yes, sir." There is pity in his cousin's face, and a kind of grudging respect, but more than anything else, exasperation. "Last chance, Jean."

Wordlessly Prouvaire shakes his head. His throat is tight.

"Damn you," Philippe mutters. "What am I going to tell Aunt Margot?"

"Tell her I love her," he says faintly, as he's manhandled out of the doorway and across the street.

End  
file.